



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# HARVARD THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

VOLUME VII

OCTOBER, 1914

NUMBER 4

---

## MYSTICISM AND MODERN LIFE<sup>1</sup>

FRANCIS G. PEABODY

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

This College cherishes the memory of its founder, whose benefactions were untrammelled by denominational conditions, but whose faith in the principles of his communion was lifelong and profound. It is therefore appropriate to set apart one day in the year when some aspect of these principles shall be presented to the College, not only as a tribute to the founder, but as a recognition of the religious comprehensiveness and ecclesiastical catholicity which it is the privilege of students here to enjoy.

What, then, are the dominating traits which mark the Society of Friends, and which determine its place in the history of religion? What are the principles which issue into that spiritual serenity and assurance, which no experience is severe enough to disturb and no persecution has been merciless enough to destroy? The Friends, we must answer, offer a distinguished illustration of that type of religious life which in many forms, ancient and modern, Christian and extra-Christian, is defined as mysticism, or that illumination of the spiritual nature which proceeds from immediate communion of the soul with God. The word "Mysticism" has become so loosely applied to whatever is obscure or esoteric that it suggests to many minds, not the most certain and

<sup>1</sup> An address on Founder's Day at Bryn Mawr College, May 13, 1914.

compelling of realities, but that which is merely mysterious or misty. The Germans meet this misapprehension by discriminating between two words: "*Mystizismus*," or the cult of the supernatural, as in Oriental theosophy or Occidental spiritualism; and "*Mystik*," or a spiritual faith in the immediate revelation, the doctrine of the Inner Light. A touch of "*Mystizismus*," it must be admitted, was often betrayed in the visions and ecstasies of the earlier Friends; but Quaker mysticism has been, in the main, singularly restrained and tranquil, consistent with prudent business, practical politics, and sober common sense. The central movement of religious life among the Friends has been a pure stream of living faith, transmitting from age to age the Master's parting promise that when the Spirit of Truth was come, it should guide men into all truth. Mysticism assumes the essential integrity of the human soul, its affinity with the Eternal, its partaking of the Divine nature, its capacity to break the chains of sin and attain the freedom of the spirit. Mysticism universalizes religious experiences which to other habits of mind are occasional or intermittent—worship, prayer, inspiration, faith, sacraments. It is difficult even for the most convinced of sacramentalists to condemn the doctrine of a continuous sacrament expressed by an English Friend—"I very much doubt," he writes, "whether, since the Lord by his grace brought me into the faith of his dear Son, I have ever broken bread or drunk wine, even in the ordinary course of life, without the remembrance of, and some devout feeling regarding, the broken body and the blood-shedding of my dear Lord and Saviour."

Nor is the company of such believers limited to the communion of Friends, or to any single period of Christian history. On the contrary, the mystical conception of the religious life, the supreme and convincing assurance that the soul of man has the capacity to respond to the

spirit of God, and is freed by this communion from all dependence on external authority, runs like a golden thread through the dark texture of Christian doctrine and binds together centuries and creeds which have little else to share. Across the Christian centuries speaks the Jew Philo: "God has breathed into man from heaven a portion of his own divinity"; "The soul of man is an indivisible portion of that divine and blessed spirit." A century passes, and Plotinus bears witness: "The wise man recognizes the idea of the good within him; this he develops by withdrawal into the holy places of his own soul." Other centuries pass, and Bernard of Clairvaux, preacher, administrator, and saint, gives his testimony: "It is in the spirit, not of sound but of penetration, not talkative but effective, that union with God occurs." Still other centuries pass and the Dominican Tauler preaches: "Revelation must take place in the spirit, for God is a spirit, and our created spirits must be lost in the uncreated." Thus through the ages this serene message is renewed. "Madam," said the Franciscan to Madame Guyon, "you are disappointed and perplexed because you seek without what you have within; accustom yourself to seek God in your own heart and you will find him." The Quakers, in short, whom the provincial theologians of England in the seventeenth century fancied were intolerable heretics, and four of whom Puritan New England hanged for pestilential non-conformity, were one link in a long chain of witnesses of the spirit, which runs all the way from the Gospel of John to the poetry of Emerson, and whose continuity justified the New England mystic in his faith that

"The word by seers or sibyls told  
In groves of oak, or fanes of gold,  
Still floats upon the morning wind,  
Still whispers to the willing mind.  
One accent of the Holy Ghost  
The heedless world hath never lost."

Such is the spiritual pedigree of Quakerism, or rather such is the unexhausted and perennial life of the Spirit from whose abundance the stream of Quakerism, like many another movement of mysticism, flows. At this point, however, one is confronted by a further and practical question. What place has this life of the spirit among the needs and problems of the modern world? Are not these beautiful traits of quietism—detachment of mind, the surrender of silence, the waiting for God, which have adorned the history of the Friends—inappropriate, not to say impracticable, under the conditions of modern life to which one must now inevitably conform? Is not this a time of action, initiative, service; a time to look out and not to look in; an age when not even the silence of a Friends' Meeting can shut out the appealing call of an unredeemed and inequitable world? Is not the mystic, like the monk of the Middle Ages, saving his own soul, instead of setting his soul to save the world? Is he not tempted by the self-indulgence of meditation, when he should be stirred to the heroism of self-sacrifice? Longfellow's monk, walking on the terrace of Amalfi, looks down upon the town below:—

“Wondering unto what good end  
All this toil and traffic tend,  
And why all men cannot be  
Free from care and free from pain  
And the sordid love of gain,  
And as indolent as he.”

May there not be something of this self-deception in spirituality, the mistaking of laziness for holiness, the withdrawal from others for one's own sake, instead of the sanctifying oneself for others' sakes?

There are many circumstances of modern life which might reasonably encourage this impression that mysticism and efficiency are mutually exclusive. A mind

profoundly concerned with communion with God might, it would seem, fail to hear the call to the service of man. Quakerism, like the monastic system, might appear to be a beautiful survival of an age which is gone. The conspicuous and pretentious organizations of ecclesiasticism, the increasing use of ceremony, ritual, art, and music as handmaids of religion, and the persistent substitution of doctrinal conformity for spiritual faith—all these characteristics of modern Christianity might seem to set the religion of the mystic in an eddy of the present age, where the elect few might move in their little circle of emotion while the current of the time swept by to other ends.

Yet this impression is in fact as superficial as it is common. One has but to recall the history of philosophy to be assured of the fundamental place which emotion must always hold in a genuine and effective religious life. A century ago the greatest of modern theologians, in the first expression of his mind, defined in epoch-making phrases the nature of religion. It was, he said, not knowledge, "for the measure of knowledge is not the measure of piety"; nor was it action, for behind all action lay a region of passive acceptance and contemplation. Religion thinks, but it is not the thought; it acts, but it is not the action. And if neither thought nor conduct, neither the reason nor the will, reveals the nature of religion, then its primary organ of expression must be sought within that third region of human experience which is occupied by the emotional life. "Your feeling," taught Schleiermacher, "in so far as it expresses the universal life you share, is your religion." "It is to be one with the Infinite, and to share in every moment the life of the Eternal." This sense of dependence is absolute, not to be balanced against any reaction of thought or deed; and in it is the source of the piety of the race. The feeling of absolute dependence leads us

past the region of inter-working causes and effects, and into the presence of the Power which controls the whole. It is but another name for our consciousness of God. In this philosophical justification of mysticism the history of modern theology began. The emotional life had found a place in philosophy. The sphere of feeling lay deeper in the religious consciousness than either doctrine or action could penetrate. The mystical experience might utter itself in theology, or in service, or in both, but these more conspicuous streams of consciousness, if they ran full and free, reported the hidden source from which they sprang, high up among the hills of God. The mystic in his search had pushed up the stream of faith to the spring from which it flows. He had entered the central shrine, which is hidden from logic or from effort, but lies open to the receptive heart when the spirit of surrender meets the Spirit of Grace.

All this the Quakers, though often in untutored ways, have seen and taught. The philosophy of religion confirms their intuitive faith. Yet this appreciation of the place of feeling is not the end of the philosophy of religion. A stream is not completely traced when one has discovered its source. A lake which has no outlet, even though it lie on a mountain top and reflect an unclouded sky, becomes a brackish pool. It is the same with the mystic's communion if it does not flow down into the channel of thought and will. Religious feeling becomes morbid, introspective, and even poisonous, if it be left to sun itself on the heights. "Master, it is good for us to be here," said Peter to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, "Let us make three tabernacles"; not knowing what he said. But the Master's ear heard the cry of the demoniac boy at the mountain's foot, and the white and glistening raiment was cast aside that the work of healing might be done, and the vision above justified by the task below.

“Not always on the mount may we  
Wrapt in the heavenly presence be.  
The shores of thought and feeling know  
The spirit’s tidal ebb and flow.  
The mount for vision—but below  
The paths of daily duty go;  
And nobler life therein shall own  
The pattern on the mountain shown.”

Here, then, is the first test which the mystic has to meet. He is tempted by the very vision which he so distinctly sees. The sufficiency of the communion may alienate him from the task of life. The common duty may seem flat and colorless after the shining of the upper air. Yet, on the other hand, if it should happen that the mystic, instead of being content with detachment and quietude of soul, descends from the height to the task, then he comes with a rare endowment of power. The vision has idealized the world. The healing of the boy is in the strength of the Mount. If the spring, which might linger in the hills above, hastens to the plains below, then it brings them refreshment and verdure. A curious dilemma therefore confronts the mystic’s faith. He has discerned the source of all vitalizing religion, but this discovery is unavailing unless the feeling in which religion rises flows down to spend itself in ways which are often remote from the mystic’s habit of mind. To have no touch of mysticism in one’s religion, to be content with an external, doctrinal, superimposed tradition instead of a vital experience, is to live on a left-over faith, to borrow or inherit instead of discovering and owning. But, on the other hand, to have no outlet for one’s mysticism is as when a sacred Jordan ends in a Dead Sea, on whose surface one may float, but from whose waters one may not drink. Two solemn alternatives, therefore, meet the mystic’s experience. Either it is the most sterile of meditations or it



is the most productive of inspirations. The mystic can do nothing by halves. If he retreats from the world, it is with a lofty indifference which may reach even a mood of scorn; if, on the other hand, he serves the world, it is with the irresistible power of a living faith. He must do nothing or much. If he uses his talent, more is added to it; if he hides it, there is taken away even that which he hath.

If this is the philosophy of mysticism, it becomes most interesting to inquire how far the Quakers have met the test. Have the satisfactions of Quietism made them indifferent to the cry of the modern world, or have they turned the stream of their mysticism into the fields of service, as modern science turns an idle river to irrigate a barren plain? What do we owe, in modern thought or in modern service, to the Society of Friends? It must be admitted that few modern thinkers of the highest rank are the direct product of Quakerism. The classic expressions of its literature move for the most part within the limited circle of their own ideals, and are contributions to spiritual autobiography rather than explorations of philosophy or nature. A faith, however, cannot be called intellectually sterile which can claim the two most permanent narratives of the life of the soul—the Journal of George Fox and the Journal of John Woolman—with which documents of confession nothing in Christian literature can be compared except the Confessions of Augustine and the Thoughts of Pascal. And even if it be admitted that the practice of piety has been the dominating theme of Quaker literature, it does not follow that religious mysticism is in its nature intellectually unfruitful. On the contrary, the two most important influences on the theology of the nineteenth century have their origins in this consciousness of communion with the Eternal, and still carry to multitudes of students the authority of this personal assurance.

Schleiermacher became in turn preacher, professor, philosopher, and theologian, the most versatile and masterful of German teachers, of whom every serious student of ethics, aesthetics, Greek philosophy, or Christian history must still take account; yet Schleiermacher was bred within the circle of Moravian piety. It was, as he said, the maternal womb in which his faith first woke to consciousness. Not his erudition only, or his eloquence, or his administrative skill, have given him his permanent place in the history of theology, but the association of these varied activities with the mystic's faith, and the solution of doctrinal problems by the test of the Christian consciousness.

Even more impressive is the case of the one American contribution to philosophy which by general consent is accepted as original, typical, and permanent—the consistent and confident mysticism of Emerson. Argument, demonstration, even discussion, seemed to him superfluous. “If any one asks me for my reasons,” he said, “I am helpless.” He had but to report what the Over-soul whispered to him. The mind was, according to his teaching, primarily not an instructor, but a listener. “He on whom the Soul descends, alone can teach.” “Within man is the soul of the Holy, the wise silence, the universal beauty, the Eternal one.” What his followers called transcendentalism, appropriating inaccurately a phrase of Kant, was but the mystical assurance which transcended proof, and which sang with Jones Very:

“In finding Thee are all things round us found,  
In losing Thee are all things lost beside.”

The unparalleled illumination and insight which give to Emerson his quality of timelessness is but an illustration of the truth which George Fox, in unstudied eloquence, taught in his Journal: “As people come into subjection

to the Spirit of God and grow up into the image and power of the Almighty, they may receive the word of wisdom that opens all things, and come to know the hidden unity of the Eternal Being."

It would appear, therefore, that the transition from mysticism to lucid and epoch-making thought is not only practicable, but may even reach the loftiest expression. When, on the other hand, we turn to the world of action the evidence becomes much more convincing. One of the facts which must suggest some self-reproach to the conscience of those Christian communions which claim the largest numbers and authority, is the modest part which they have taken in the great social movement of the modern world as compared with those whose opinions have seemed unsound or whose practices have been unecclesiastical. Wherever Christian teaching has been dominated by supreme concern for salvation in another life, there the habit of other-worldliness has tended to induce a depreciation of the vicissitudes of this world, and has accepted present evils as a preparation for eternity. Wherever, on the other hand, the worth and dignity of the individual soul have been deeply realized, and its immediate and personal communion with God has been the supreme desire, there the sins and wrongs of society which obstruct that communion have been the natural object of attack. The curious consequence has been that many of the greatest names in the history of social reform and redemption are those of men and women whom the theologians of the Church might describe as heretics. The anti-slavery cause, the reformation of prisons, the care of the insane and the feeble-minded, the beginnings of scientific charity, and the securing of political rights for the masses of the people—all these crusades, in which the new spirit of social service began, call to mind personalities in whom the spirit of Christian consecration was more conspicuous

than the habit of ecclesiastical conformity. Samuel Gridley Howe, in whom, his biographer said, were combined the spirit of Sir Galahad and the Good Samaritan; Joseph Tuckerman, the first American to formulate the doctrines of modern charity; Dorothea Dix, the frail young school-teacher who revolutionized the care of the insane—all these were devoted to the social salvation of others on earth rather than to their own personal salvation in heaven. All confessed themselves unable to meet the tests of Christian dogma which prevailed in their time, but all were ready for the welcome of Christ: "Come ye blessed of my Father. . . . For inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of these least, ye have done it unto me."

Of this practical obedience to the call for Christian service the Society of Friends has been a distinguished example. From this unassuming and often despised communion, rooted in the faith of mysticism, there has grown an almost unparalleled efflorescence of applied Christianity. No other Christian body was so soon or so consistently committed to the cause of anti-slavery. In 1688 the Friends of Germantown offered the first official protest presented by any religious body on this subject. In 1783 the first English petition for the abolition of the slave-trade was laid by Quakers before the House of Commons. The same sense of humane responsibility has led the Friends to their conspicuous service of the Negro, the Indian, and the Oriental; to the free and undenominational education of both sexes in schools and colleges; and to leadership in the movement, now at last world-wide, for the abolition of war, and of the almost equally ruinous wastefulness of the preparation for war—a wastefulness which now, it is said, involves the six Great Powers of Europe in an expenditure of more than one and one-half thousand millions of dollars a year. A communion whose cornerstone is the essential integrity and spiritual potentiality

of the humblest human soul, cannot view without protest this degradation of humanity, or surrender its faith in the final triumph of reason even among the ruthless ambitions of political affairs.

Among such witnesses of mysticism in action there are two of such pre-eminence that they must be specially recalled. The work of Elizabeth Fry in the prisons of England was equally remarkable for what it found, for what it accomplished, and for the agent of reformation. It found a condition both of law and of discipline incredibly mediaeval and shocking; a law prescribing no less than three hundred crimes, even such as the robbing of a hen-roost or the larceny of five shillings, as punishable by death; and a conduct of prison discipline so incredibly brutal and debasing that jail-fever and jail-madness were almost equally familiar. It accomplished the transformation of the law of England from one of revenge to one of reformation; rescuing from the gallows all offenders except those guilty of another's life or treason to the State; ending the disgraceful history of England's convict-ships and convict-settlements, and converting the behavior of women in prison from that of brawling mendicants to that of restrained and self-governed penitents. Most remarkable of all was the personality through whom this epoch-making work was done. Mrs. Fry was bred in the tranquil environment of English affluence, a Gurney of Earlham, descended from Friends through both parents, the great-granddaughter of Robert Barclay. She became the wife of a wealthy merchant and the mother of twelve children. No circumstances could have appeared less suggestive of heroism or sacrifice. Her life seemed completely preoccupied by maternal obligations and by devotion to the stricter practices of the Society of Friends. Publicity offended her taste and enthusiasm was foreign to her habit of mind. Yet the call to service was irresistible and the word of

her Master was in her ears: "I was in prison and ye visited me." The filthy wards of Newgate became the scene of her cleansing ministries, and the Inner Light which illuminated her face shone into the hearts of the depraved and condemned. Mysticism was not only consistent with action, but gave to it a composure, fortitude, and assurance which made their impression equally on the felon in her cell and the Queen on her throne.

Even more notable in its fusion of feeling and action was the work of John Bright. Up and down Great Britain he preached the gospel of popular liberty, the rights of the plain people, the iniquity of a tax on bread, the extension of the franchise, and the cause of the North in our Civil War; and unlike most agitators and reformers he lived to see all the causes which he loved triumphant, and to receive the almost universal admiration of a career which had begun amid the clamor of opposition and contempt. Yet throughout all those years of unrelenting contention and protest, Bright was sustained by the habits and instincts bred in the Society of Friends. "He always remained a Friend," says his biographer, "both in his heart and his life." "Religious feeling was the very basis of his life." "He practised the silence of his sect and drew thence the strength of his soul, the purity of his heart, and the quality of his speech." Lord Morley said that "the most impressive and pure piece of religion he ever witnessed was John Bright reading a chapter of the Bible to his maid servants, shortly after his wife's death, in his beautiful and feeling voice, followed by the Quaker silence." What a revelation is here of the source of Bright's political wisdom, and even of his unrivalled eloquence! Behind the stream of his argument lay the fountain of his feeling. Through his work as agitator was revealed his detachment from self-interest and pride. His invective was tempered by quietude of spirit. His social programme expressed

his faith in the capacity of each humble human soul. His politics were the flower of his religion.

These indications of the nature and possibilities of mysticism are not without instructiveness, even for those whose religious habits may be very remote from that of the Society of Friends. Mysticism as a religious practice has proved itself unadapted to many, probably to most, Christian lives. The average experience cannot rise into this high region unaided, and demands the spiritual support of external, visible, and authoritative standards or forms. Priesthoods, rituals, ceremonies, and creeds sustain many a life which cannot trust itself. Mysticism is thus a faith for the elect, adequate for those only who need no support but God. To these the unbroken silence is more eloquent than the most stately ritual, the presence of God more convincing than any creed concerning him, and the Quaker Meeting, not bare and empty, but rich and full with the Eternal Presence. Yet, even for those not disciplined in this surrender of silence, the mystic's faith must remain the beginning of spiritual efficiency. Nothing can be a sufficient substitute for this personal assurance of the Inner Light. All the externalities of religion are scaffoldings which steady the structure while it is building, but other foundation can no man lay than the life of God in the soul of man. It is not an accident that in many Anglican churches, and this year in a cathedral of the Protestant Episcopal Church, provision has been made for a Friends' Meeting, that amid the elaboration of ritual which to many minds is the best interpreter of Christian faith, there may be the even more profound appeal of silence, simplicity, and self-surrender. By so much as the religious life is a tradition or a dictation instead of an experience, by so much it remains a shaky, tremulous, and temporary possession. By so much as any life attains this personal communion, by so much is its faith secured against the

storms of change, and as the scaffoldings of authority or conformity fall away the simple stability of the Christian character is revealed. On this foundation one may build as he please, wood, stubble, or precious stones, and each man's work will be tested by the fire of experience; but beneath all diversities of Christian ministrations lies this fundamental fact of the need of man for God and the answer of God to man. The Apostle says that in the Jewish Law a veil was interposed between the soul and God; "which veil was taken away by Christ." That is what happens when one passes from conformity to communion, from the external authority to the inward witness. A veil is taken away, and with unveiled face the worshipper beholds the glory of God and may be changed into the same image.

Here, then, is the place of mysticism in modern life. It does not satisfy the common and legitimate desire for intellectual definiteness or for aesthetic persuasion. A reasonable, prosaic, work-a-day religion, adapted to a practical world, may have in it little of mysticism, and may even view the mystic's practices of piety with an amused contempt. Mysticism, either in its passionate fervor or its silent restraint, is likely to remain a privilege of the initiated, an inner shrine of confidence which many do not presume to enter. It is not every one who can satisfy his piety with Whittier's confession:

"In calm and cool and silence once again  
I find my old accustomed peace among  
My brethren, where perchance no human tongue  
Shall utter words; where never hymn is sung,  
Nor deep-mouthed organ blown, nor censer swung,  
Nor dim light falling through the pictured pane.  
There, syllabled by silence, let me hear  
The still small voice which reached the prophet's ear."

Yet, when it comes to those conclusive evidences of character and completely generous types of service, where



utility, expediency, and even obligation, halt and nothing is effective but a sheer self-effacing committal of life to its best, then that complete quietude of spirit which steadies and lifts conduct out of self-consideration and pride can be derived from nothing but the habitual consciousness of a Divine will to which one habitually submits the problems of life.

"The true mystic quest," it has been lately pointed out in a most erudite and brilliant study of Mysticism, "may as well be fulfilled in the market as in the cloister; by Joan of Arc on the battle-field as by Simeon Stylites on his pillar"; by "energetic no less than contemplative powers." "The real achievements of Christian mysticism are more clearly seen in Catherine of Siena regenerating her native city, Joan of Arc leading the armies of France, Ignatius creating the Society of Jesus, Fox giving life to the Society of Friends, than in all the ecstasies and austerities of the Egyptian 'fathers in the desert.'"<sup>2</sup>

That fusion of mystic communion with ethical passion, of the energetic and the contemplative powers meets us in its purity when we trace the spiritual experience of Jesus Christ. Not a church, or a creed, or a form, sustained his spirit and made sacrifice a joy, but the habitual intimacy with his Father, and the convincing call to do the Father's will. "I seek not mine own will, but the will of him that sent me." "I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do." "Father, not my will, but Thine be done." To lack this consciousness of mystical communion may not be to fail of conventional conformity, or of respectable morality, but it may well meet the Master's judgment of those who depended on external sanctions and supports, "Yet hath he not root in himself; for, when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended." To have that root

<sup>2</sup>E. Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 1913, p. 45 ff.

in oneself is to secure a vigorous and varied growth both of thought and of action. To feel oneself an instrument is to do one's work with a keen edge. Philosophy is most convincing when the mystic's experience enriches the reason; action is noblest when the Inner Light shines through the self-effacing deed. "Peace," a Friend has written, "is just as much a positive and vivid experience as pain. It is not the cessation of experience, but the reconciliation of the soul to the Master-Power." That was the discovery which made Florence Nightingale, at the end of a life of intense activity and masterful administration, find her peace in the words of a sixteenth century mystic: "True religion is to have no other will but God's." "Mysticism," the same servant of humanity said at another time, "is but a hard word for the Kingdom of God within."